

# DEAD OR ALIVE

Drawings by Frank Tenney Johnson

By ELMORE ELLIOTT PEAKE



"I want to set 'em up to all you fellers. A man don't collect a thousand dollars every day."

**G**UBE ACRES' smithy, perched on a shoulder of Little Thunder Mountain, was usually slumbering by sunset; but tonight at nine o'clock eight or ten saddle horses were tethered outside. Inside, round a smoky lantern on an anvil, sat their riders, a lean, shaggy crew bristling with arms and flushed with liquor. In a far corner—a corner that everyone avoided—a long, coffin-shaped box of raw wood, with a strip of black cloth over the lid, rested on a pair of trestles.

Presently a rap sounded on the double doors. Talk instantly ceased. Gango Shuckspur, a sharp-snouted, yellow-whiskered man, lowered the heavy bar, peeped warily out, and admitted a mountaineer who was greeted as Bud. He was evidently expected. He accepted a "dish" of liquor, and reported that there were no Pentecosts on the road.

"Then take a look at a Pentecost that never will be on the road ag'in," said someone.

Bud shuffled over to the coffin, drew back the cloth, and gazed curiously at the white face beneath. He seemed particularly fascinated by a round, purplish spot in the center of the dead man's forehead.

"That sartainly was a clean hit you made, Rat!" he observed admiringly.

"I reckon you couldn't poke your finger nearer the middle of an elderberry pie," complacently answered the young slayer of Laban Pentecost.

"Shoot from a rest?"

"Nary rest. And he was better'n four hundred yards away—wasn't he, Boys?"

The "boys," bearded and beardless, nodded affirmatively.

"Think you'll git your thousand dollars' reward?" pursued Bud.

"I'll git it or know the reason why!" boasted Rat.

"How comes it all the blood money goes to you?"

Rat rolled a cigarette—a novel form of smoke-stick on Little Thunder. "Our folks agreed, if we took Labe alive, to divide the reward equal, sheer and sheer alike; but if he was kilt the feller that kilt him was to git it all—and I was the feller!"

"Some say Jap done it," ventured Bud.

"Tain't sartain I didn't, nuther," sullenly interposed a youth in his teens.

"It's as sartain as that the moon air made of green cheese," retorted Rat hotly. "Fust place, I seen Labe still standin' behind a rock after Jap shot. Second place, Jap was only two hun'erd yards from him. I was

four or better. At two hun'erd yards a bullet would have plugged Labe's skull. This 'un didn't: just flattened out ag'in' his forehead, as you can see for yourself, adjaetly as it would do from that old charcoal burner of mine at four hundred yards. It was the shock that kilt him."

"Nachally," agreed the visitor, squatting on his heels in the absence of a seat, within hailing distance of the pigginn of liquor. "There's so many stories floatin' around about this fracas that I'd like to hyear the truth for once, if you don't mind tellin' it."

**I**T was this away," began Rat, nothing loath. "When Labe kilt Uncle Posy we Shuckspurs abided by the law: never lifted a hand in revenge. But as soon as the dep'ty Sheriff posted the dead-or-alive reward ag'in' Labe we 'uns hit the trail, as we had a right to do.

"For a week we didn't find hide nor hair of him. Then one day it just so fell out that we ketched him on Ellens Needle, above Ransom's old still house, where he'd come to meet Rowan and Chantry Flitt with victuals for him. We had all three of 'em treed, like a squoll up a shellbark. They couldn't git away no-how. Still, it was a juberous job to git at 'em, they bein' full armed and the kind that die a fightin'.

"We kept a spatterin' lead back and fo'th for three days. Two of us got creased, and Tobe Link lost a finger. Then, the evenin' of the third day, I plugs Labe. I knowed it the minute I hit him; for he whirled around two or three times, like a man with the blind staggers, and pitched into the bresh. Well, it was him we 'uns was after, not t'other boys; so I hollered up to them and said we'd let them off if they'd give up Laban's body. For I aimed to make sure of the reward by totin' the body down to the Sheriff at Jackson.

"It was airly candlelightin' by then, and the boys asked till mornin' to think it over. At sun-up they hollered down they'd give up the body if we 'uns would let 'em make a proper coffint box for it. Of co'se, Labe bein' their sister Latchiepell's sweetheart, we had no adjections to that, and let 'em thoo our line, and for five hours Labe's body lay in the thicket while Rowan and Chantry war down at old Hatcher Meeks's makin' that box just like you see it thar."

He plunged a gourd into the pigginn of corn whisky, guzzled the poison like spring water, and then started gourd and pigginn down the line.

"Tween you and me, I don't mind sayin'," he added in conclusion, "as I'm more'n half sorry it failed to me to shoot Labe, spite of the thousand dollars I git for the

job; for many air the good times me and Labe have had together at turkey shoots and hoss races, with nuvver a qua'l between us."

"Still, a thousand dollars air a consida'ble pinch of money," reflected Bud. "Reckon you won't scassly know how to spend it."

"Reckon I will," retorted Rat coolly. "Fust thing, I'll buy me a gold watch and chain, just like that surveyor's I set stakes for last year. Then I'll buy me a suit of store clothes, a cellyloid collar and cuffs to match, a juice harp, and a smokeless powder rifle,—one that won't flatten out at four hunerd yards, you bet!—also a new six-shooter and a .45 automatic pistol, if I like the feel of it in my hand. I aim to git a clock too,—that kind that runs eight days without windin' and has a brass hoss on top of it."

"What you want a clock for?"

"Well, me and Pheeny can git married now, with this money comin' in," answered Rat half sheepishly, "and I want to give her a clock so she can have dinner prompt at twelve. Anything aggrervates me is late dinner, on a cloudy day when a woman can't squint up at the sun."

"Kin Pheeny tell time?" asked Bud, with a wink at the others.

"No," retorted Rat sharply. "Neither can I; but I reckon we're both nachally bright enough to learn."

Some of the clansmen chuckled. One yawned with a wolfish gape of mouth and gleam of yellow teeth. Bud stropped the six-inch blade of a hunting knife across his boot top, preliminary to paring a slice of tobacco from his plug.

"That won't take all your thousand," he then said. "What else you aimin' to buy?"

"Well, I was just tellin' the boys here, before you come, that I've always hankered for an organ."

"An organ! Why, Pheeny couldn't tell a note from a flyspeck!"

Rat's beady eyes snapped at the jibe. "What in tar has that to do with it? An organ is a purty piece of furniture,—purtier, to my mind, than a foldin' bed,—and it'll make a tidy rest for the clock. Far as music goes, I ain't dependin' on the organ. I'm aimin' to buy a funnygraft."

"Take a fool's advice and don't," interposed old Ariel Thistlewood, a member of the Shuckspur clan by marriage. "I heerd of a feller once as bought a funnygraft, and he couldn't stop the tarnal thing. He started her at sun-up, and at candlelightin' she war still a grindin'. She whanged away all night, and the babies couldn't sleep. Next mawnin' she war still shakin' out 'Turkey



in the straw.' She kep' it up all that day ag'in, and trat night the family had to move out into the cowshed to get some sleep."

"What fin'ly come of it, Uncle Ariel?" asked Jap.

"The last that the feller who told me about it had heerd," answered the truthful uncle, "she war still a wheezin', and the feller that owned her had moved over the spur and built hisself a new cabing."

"I guess a .45 would have stopped her," observed Rat.

**B**UD took another drink, this time without the formality of an invitation.

"What you fellers layin' over here all night for?" he asked, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Tain't lucky to travel with a corpse after dark. 'Sides that, we didn't keer to take any chances on bein' laywaid by the Flitts and Pentecosts. Still, old Popsy Flitt sent us word there wouldn't be any laywayin', and I never knew him to tell a lie. He said he'd stand by the law—which I call fair talk, comin' from a loser."

"If you ax me, it ain't," irascibly interjected Cato Shuckspur, a graybeard. "I've took notice in my time that the law air uncommonly like a jassack,—looks one way and kicks t'other. It air as wanderin' and unsartin as a blind sow rootin' for acorns,—which air ad-jackly the kind of an animule that old Popsy air cute enough to toll to his own swill bar'l. Hyer's the best law, if you ax me!" thwacking his revolver holster with an oath. "It gives every man an ekal chance, 'thout fear nor favior; and there war a time, before he was a justice of the peace and a preacher to boot, when Popsy would have said so hisself."

Rat puffed at a cigarette until the hearty indorsement of this sentiment by the older men had subsided, then said explanatorily to Bud, "Popsy and Latchiepell are comin' here to hold a sarvice over the remains. I don't relish it none. We also give Rowan and Chantry permission to come, without shootin' irons. They're overdue now. I hope they won't be much later; for us fellers have lost consid'able sleep the last three nights."

**H**ALF an hour passed, however, before hoofs clattered outside, followed by a sharp rat-a-tat on the door, as if beaten with the butt of a riding whip. Popsy Flitt, two youths, and a slender, black-haired, bareheaded girl were admitted.

The sage of Little Thunder wore a rusty, long-skirted frock coat and a shaggy, bell-shaped beaver hat which had weathered the rain and shine of many a year. His silvery hair floated over the broad but stooped shoulders which were reminiscent of his athletic prime. His ancient, frosty face was seamed with countless lines; but his piercing eyes, steel-trap mouth, and hawk-bill nose repelled any suggestion of senility. The wild, whisky-soaked crew in the smithy quailed before his Jovian glance, and straightened up from their lounging postures with a show of respect.

"We aim to set a spell with the dead and to hold a fitting sarvice," he began at once, in the sonorous tones of the professional orator. "Ye can go or stay, as ye see fit. What ye hear, red-handed with the blood of a fellow being, won't cause ye to leap with joy, and them that go may sleep better than them that stay. But suit your will."

The unholy Shuckspurs had a superstitious fear of this man of God, and some of them sidled toward the door. Others, however, doggedly kept their seats.

"Speak up, Rat!" said the old man imperiously. "You murdered the boy in the box thar. What's your ch'ice?"

"I don't see no special call for we 'uns to stay," answered Rat sulkily. "'Sides, we know what's decent. But we got consid'able at stake in a money way. We can't afford to take no chances on Labe's body being sperited away. You have any adjections to our settin' a watch outside, while the rest of us go up to Cube's cabing?"

"None whatever. But set your watchmen back to back so they'll stand fast; for I look for a manifestation here tonight that will shake this mounting to its granite roots."

"Look here, Popsy!" protested Rat. "Taint fair for you to harp on peace, and then come down here and call up devils and sich ag'in' us. I ain't afeerd, for I've acted accordin' to law; but it do seem to me a juberous thing to be triffin' with the powers of hell."

The ghost of a smile flitted across the octogenarian's face; but he returned grimly, "Neither hell can hurt the innocent nor Heaven protect the guilty!"

**T**HE girl Latchiepell suddenly crossed the cinder floor of the smithy and knelt at the foot of the coffin. In the dead silence the Shuckspurs stirred uneasily. Old Ariel Thistlewood polished the stock of his rifle with his coat sleeve. Rat passed a tremulous hand across his chinless, ferret face. Then all of them hastily evacuated the building.

Oddly enough, the bereaved girl rose to her feet with a knowing smile. The grandsire stroked her glossy

hair half tenderly, half playfully. Chantry Flitt, with a grin, slipped outside.

"They've all gone up to Cube's, without settin' a watch," he reported on his return. "Cube is helpin' all he can. He's just tapped a keg of whisky."

"Then turn that lantern lower," commanded Popsy. "Less time lost the better."

He crossed over to the coffin, loosened the lid with a jack knife, and laid it aside. The interior presented an unusual sight. A rifle lay along each side of the corpse, two six-shooters between his knees, and the handles of two more rested inside his palms. Most amazing of all, the dead man's eyes were open and a smile on his face.

As he rose to a sitting posture, Latchiepell, though laughing, clutched her grandfather's arm, and when Laban climbed stiffly out of the box and limped toward her with an outstretched hand she burst into tears.

"It was such a risk!" she sobbed.

"The air was none too good," declared Laban, "specially when that cover made out of one of old Mother Meeks's dresses sagged down on my face. And once I nearly sneezed."

"Oh, Laban, suppose you had?" gasped the girl.

He laughed recklessly. "I'd have kicked that lid twenty foot high,—it was held by only two nails,—rose up, and begin to shoot with both hands. At the same time Row and Chant, who were trailin' us within gunshot, would have done the same. We had it all planned out."

"It's a wonder that bullet didn't kill you!" exclaimed Latchiepell tenderly, gazing at his bruised forehead.

Again he laughed. "It never hit me there: it hit me here, over the heart. Chant painted that spot on my forehead with a pokeberry, just for fun, when he was layin' me out and flourin' my face over to make me look pale. It wasn't a direct shot. Rat's bullet struck the ground fifty yards in front of me and ketched me on the bounce. I seen the dust fly—I heard it comin', hummin' like a bumblebee. But it stunned me just the same."

The old warhorse smiled admiringly at the daredevilry of the hoax. "But how come you boys to play this fool trick?"

"Twa'n't a fool trick," protested Rowan. "It was the only way out. The worst that could happen to Labe was to be turnt over to the Sheriff, and he allowed he'd sooner be turnt over alive than dead. But he hoped to get a chance to sneak out of the coffin som'ers along the road, with me and Chant to lend a hand. Then, when the Shucks turned in here for the night, we thought of this funeral sarvice game."

"I've thought of a better game than that, Popsy," announced Laban, with a twinkle. "That's for you to marry me and Latchie right here and now."

"Marry you!" exclaimed the old man. "Great Gawd, Boy! you ain't fair out of the jaws of death yet."

"I'm out fur enough to say the words," declared the other stoutly. "I ain't forgot that our weddin' dinner was all laid in when these hyenas, with the smell of blood money in their noses, broke loose on me. My



"Shake!" said the Sheriff.

license air at home, all signed and sealed, 'tween the kivers of Mammy's Bible."

"Be you sot on it too?" asked Popsy of Latchiepell.

"No," she answered firmly in spite of her sudden pallor. "I'll marry no man with a price on his head. He killed old Popsy Shuckspur in self defense, and there are witnesses to prove it. Let him go down to Jackson and stand trial, and then I'll marry him. I've told him so before."

"Several times," said Laban, with a whimsical glance at his sweetheart. "And I'll go. Her notion chimes in with mine, anyhow. I was a fool to hide out in the beginnin'."

"Never a truer word spoken!" declared Popsy fervently, seizing the youth's hand. "And there ain't a

jury in the State will convict you. Now let's be moving."

Chantry stole out again to reconnoiter. A light still burned in Cube Acres' cabin, and tipsy laughter floated through the open window from the table at which the Shuckspurs were playing poker. Rowan and Laban nailed the lid on the coffin again, deadening the blows with the blacksmith's leather apron, and the little group stole noiselessly forth to their horses. In the darkness the lovers swiftly embraced and exchanged a kiss. Then Latchiepell and the old man rode off in one direction; the three youths in another,—toward Jackson.

**T**HE "Temple of Justice" at Jackson—to borrow a phrase from the silver-tongues who forgathered therein at quarter sessions—was adorned with a Greek façade. It was quite imposing from a distance; but a nearer view revealed the tobacco-stained bases of the columns and the ribs of lath staring through ragged holes in the plaster veneer. However, the columns still faithfully supported a pediment whereon was represented, in plaster bas relief, the conquest of Lo the poor Indian by the hardy pioneer; while Justice, from a safe vantage in the background, looked approvingly on.

A little before noon of the day following the tryst at Cube Acres' forge half a dozen men were tilted back in chairs on this portico, smoking, talking, and laughing. But mostly they laughed, in various keys, from the treble pipe of Newt Sanders, the one-armed circuit clerk, to the basso profundo of County Recorder George Oakes; while Charlie Enders the Sheriff intermittently buried his face in his hands, grew purple about the neck and ears, shook convulsively, and squealed like a pig stuck in a fence. For the Flitt boys and Labe Pentecost had brought to town the story of the hoaxing of the Shuckspurs.

Presently a cloud of dust appeared down the road, and a few minutes later old Cato Shuckspur, as unkempt and shaggy as a Hun invading imperial Rome, rounded the corner into Main street, his rifle across his saddle, and a home-made sheepskin holster dangling from each hip.

The next horseman followed at an interval of a couple of rods, the third similarly, and so on to the rear, which was closed by a two-horse wagon laden with a long, black-lidded box. The driver was Rat Shuckspur. In a spirit of bravado, braced by moonshine whisky, he was using the end of the coffin for a seat—and no King in coronation pageant ever sat with stiffer back or prouder mien.

"Hyer we be, Sheriff!" he called out grandiloquently, as the wheel scraped the horse-block. "I reckon Brother Curly got you word down what I war comin' with?"

"Yes," answered Enders, descending the steps; "but we had about given you up. Thought maybe the Flitts or Pentecosts had wooled you."

Rat's little puckered face glowed. "The woolin' air t'other way about. I've got a thousand dollars' worth of Pentecost in this here box. Done it in fair fight too, at over four hunderd yard. Hey, Boys?"

The boys nodded stiffly. They were much too close to the dreaded machinery of the law to feel entirely at ease. "Shall I unkiver him?" continued Rat.

"Oh, no, not here in the street," demurred the Sheriff. "That wouldn't be nice. Better—better take him inside the courthouse." He suddenly broke into a series of cackles, gurgles, and squeaks, and clapped a handkerchief to his face.

"What's ailin' you, Sheriff?" queried Rat. "You act like a hoss with the epizudick."

"It's what they call influenza," explained Judge Poorman gravely.

"New disease to me," observed Rat. "But you can gamble that whisky, in hawg doses, will cure it—cure anything. That reminds me. I want to set 'em up to all you fellers. A man don't collect a thousand dollars' every day. Besides, I ain't had a sniff of red licker in a coon's age."

**T**HE company crossed the street to a saloon, picking up a number of recruits in transit. Rat's score came to two dollars and thirty cents—to settle which he was compelled to draw an uncle aside and effect a loan.

"Now, Sheriff," he ran on briskly, puffing at the cigar with which Enders had returned the treat, "how do the law provide for this money to be paid,—in bills, gold, or silver?"

"The treasurer will draw you a check."

"The rub about a check," objected Rat, "is that I'd have to indorse it. About a week ago I spraint my hand so I can scassily hold a pen, and that's the God's truth!"

"You can make your mark."

"Hate to, though. Looks so cussed ign'unt."

"Oh, everybody knows you can write," Enders assured him, with a wink at Ben Poorman. "But first you must make your proof."

"How be that done?" asked Rat warily. "Don't put me thoo no unnecessary monkeyshines. I don't take to 'em like you law fellers."

"It's easy. Just bring the coffin into the courtroom, expose the body to me, and prove by two reputable witnesses that it is the one demanded by the law."

"Would Uncle Cate and Uncle Ar'el here do for wit-

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ately intent on walking up that gangplank like a well man, his jaws set until the muscles bunched under his shrunken cheeks, Ramori got to his feet. Already Hogan had muttered a profane and fine oath of encouragement and admiration; already the widow was behind him.

"Keep close to me," Ramori said to her; "but put no hand out unless you see me fall. Got to walk aboard alone, because that man at the top, the one with the beard, is the ship's doctor. The minute I'm past him pay no more attention to me. Go below to the second class and stay there, because—because I'll be all right!"

It was almost like an afterthought when they were started on their formidable journey that he turned and looked at her with gentle eyes and said, "And in case I don't see you again, God bless you!"

HE looked away when he saw that her eyes suddenly filled with tears, and he tried not to hear her prayers as he tottered slowly upward, clutching the rails on both sides so tightly that the bones showed white through his bloodless skin, and by sheer mental effort driving his trembling knees to their task.

His head roared with giddiness and he fixed his eyes on the center of Hogan's broad back to make certain that something in his world was secure. It seemed to him that the gangplank beneath his feet was reeling and twisting, the great ship swaying dizzily to and fro, and the lighter behind leaping like a cork. Once he thought he must fall, and fought a wild desire to throw himself to his knees for a rest and recovery. The still sea was to him in a tempest, and the fleckless sky whirling and doubling as if storm tossed. He fell to counting his steps, "One, two, three—"

Would that interminable journey never end? Ah, here he was at the head! There stood the doctor! Now or never! This the end of the gantlet! He dared to release his handholds and stand erect. He succeeded in passing out his ticket, standing while the doctor began examining it, and then Hogan came shoving back with questions, and the doctor impatiently passed the sick man that he might rid himself of this big Irish pest. The widow raised a loud, protesting voice, much to the amusement of all within hearing. A bit of repartee brought a laugh; but under cover of this timely diversion no one heeded a bent, staggering figure that desperately made its way along the rail by the cabins, clinging hand over hand, fighting every inch of the way, and intent only on escaping from sight. A stateroom door stood open; but piled on the berth was baggage. He slid farther along the white wall, still dreading a collapse, until he came in contact with a brass handle to which he clung, which was to him as a beacon to a storm-tossed mariner. He clutched it desperately, twisted it in frantic haste, swung open a stateroom door, and looked inside. It was empty. He swung blindly to the door, got across that formidable brass threshold, pulled the door shut after him, gathered himself for the greatest effort of all, swayed across the narrow cabin, which had suddenly become dark and unreal, and pitched forward into a berth, crumpled, unconscious, and with a thin spray of red flecking his lips.

## DEAD OR ALIVE

nesses? They're both old graybeards with a kind of honest look about 'em."

"They'll do."

"Do we have to be sworn in?" spoke up Cate suspiciously.

"Yes."

"Then I'll be damned if I do it!" he announced flatly. "I don't like this messin' with the law nohow. I knowed a feller once that made oath to some piddlin' thing that another feller had did,—forget what just now,—and I'll be dod-rotted if they didn't send him to jail for it. I'll stay outside and watch the hosses and let somebody else be sworn in."

Charlie Enders' "epizudick" again assailed him in aggravated form. Rat roundly cursed his uncle for his cowardice. But Cate remained obdurate, and Selim Shuckspare was finally persuaded to serve in his stead.

FOUR of the clan unloaded the precious box and hoisted it to their shoulders, and the procession passed up the flagged walk, followed by a score of spectators. At the big carved doors of the building a momentary confusion was caused by Enders' request that all weapons be deposited outside. Then the line entered a corridor that was damp and chill by contrast with the bright sun-

IT seemed but a moment later that he was aroused by the sounds of voices and the flaring of a light. It took him a long time to reorganize and collect his faculties, and even his indomitable will was broken by the fear that they had discovered and were about to send him back to land, rejected; but slowly he became aware of a muffled, regular, throbbing sound, and he looked at the curtains, his heart leaping exultantly as he recognized that nothing save a deep sea swell could thus sway them. That man with the beard—who was he? Oh, yes, the ship's doctor. And that voluble woman behind him, who, with arms familiarly akimbo, declared that her cousin was far from being a sick man, but that "Thim Kildares niver could stand travelin'?" Oh, yes, the widow, faithful, alarmed, who had doubtless instigated the search and was now bending over and calling on the saints to preserve and protect so brave a gentleman! Ramori looked weakly up at the doctor, who had to lean far forward to hear his words, and gave the signal of his unquenchable spirit.

"They said I couldn't come," he whispered; "but I did. And here I am! Too late to turn me back. I'm goin' to see the big lady that stands at the foot of the bay. Then I'm goin'—goin' to smell the wind that comes clean off the big Rockies and up through the sagebrush." He twisted his head and said, "Gosh! but this is growin' weather for corn! That forty— No man's ever whipped till he gives up. I'm goin' to win yet, I am!"

And so his whisper trailed on, and his feverish eyes, unquenched, valiant, rested on the surgeon, who shook his head doubtfully, then turned to Mrs. Murphy with a puzzled question.

"What I want to know," snapped the doctor, "is how the deuce he ever got here?"

And the widow, on being assured that it was too late to put her charge off the ship, confessed to the conspiracy, while the surgeon repeated over and over, "Grit! Sheer grit! Maybe he will live. Hard to kill fellows like that."

THERE is a beacon held aloft in New York Harbor, a colossal statue of hope for those who understand it. There is a ship's crew, still sailing the seas, who still speak at intervals of the fight made by the optimist, who has, somehow, become for them an example for those who waver weak heartedly. They tell the story to the discouraged as proof that all things, even Death, must yield to those who do not capitulate. A prosperous old Irishwoman who runs a boarding house at Atlantic City, never tires of recounting the tale, and Bill Parlow, dumb in words, but faithful in friendship, hangs every night on his dressing room wall as a mascot a message received some years ago that reads:

I've won out. Thank them all for me, and don't ever forget that it's them that tries that does.

But last of all does Ted Williams, forgotten as Ramori the Great, appreciate that of such humble stuff as he is made the beacon of life to lend hope and courage to those who, distressed, sometimes falter when the way ahead appears dark, and perilous, and blind!

shine outside, climbed a winding flight of stairs, and filed down an aisle to the rostrum at the far end of the room.

"Seems as though we ought to have a preacher," suggested George Oakes solemnly.

A titter rippled over the crowd; but Rat wheeled nervously. "Do the law require it?"

"No; but it would seem more Christian-like."

"He war prayed over quite a spell last night," remarked Ariel Thistlewood. "Seems as though he wouldn't need no more so soon."

"And by a man who knows how to pray too," added Rat.

"Let it go then," said the Sheriff. "Open the coffin!"

The opening was a tedious task, with only a stove poker and an old window weight for tools, and the sweat was dripping from Rat's chin before it was finished. Finally, though, with a desperate wrench, he tore the lid off with a sound of splintering wood.

At the sight presented to his view Rat's eyes glazed with vacancy and his jaw dropped like a broken spring. In place of Laban's head there lay a grinning jack-o'-lantern, fashioned from a pumpkin, and the body space was occupied by several lengths

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A broadside of laughter from the spectators, already primed for the joke, shook the room. But above the laughter rang out a loud and resonant oath from Rat as he danced in an ecstasy of fury.

"I know who done it!" he shrieked. "It was that blasted, hook-nosed old Popsy Flitt—him and that wench of a Latchiepell! They done it—after I trusted 'em—after I let 'em in to hold a sarvice over him! And now my thousand dollars are gone!" Tears filled his eyes.

"Come with me," said the Sheriff in an undertone.

He led Rat into the Judge's chamber, a high-ceiled, gloomy room, with massive, Flemish oak table and chairs, and more books than the mountaineer had ever seen in all his life before.

"Rat," said the irrepressible joker, "Rowan and Chantry Flitt told me a strange thing this morning. They told me that their grandfather raised Laban Pentecost from the dead last night."

Rat's face froze in terror; but he faltered out, "A likely lie!"

"Only," added Enders, "either Labe or Labe's ghost was with them. He came down to give himself up. Judge Goodman, after hearing his story, felt sure he would appear for trial, and released him on his own recognizance. I think—" he paused and stepped over to a window. "Yes, they are down there yet. Take a look for yourself."

Rat advanced reluctantly, crossing the thick, noiseless rug with the gingerly tread of a cat in wet grass. He looked down. On the sward below, in a spot secluded by a brick wall, where the Sheriff had placed them in order to avoid possible trouble, sat the Flitt boys and Laban Pentecost, playing mumble-the-peg with a jackknife.

Rat turned to the Sheriff a face on which superstition and commonsense strove for mastery. "That's Labe—or his ghost," said he huskily. "But I don't see no bullet mark on his forehead."

"Mightn't that mark have been made by a pokeberry?" asked Enders with an enlightening twinkle. "Mightn't your shot have failed to kill Labe? And mightn't he and the Flitts have put up a game on you?"

The truth percolated slowly through Rat's mind. "More'n likely," he admitted, with a flush of shame. But a moment later he added with an illuminated face, "Sheriff, I ain't sorry. Me and Labe had no fuss. Since I kilt him—or thought I had—I ain't slept well. I'd sooner see him alive down thar than have that thousand dollars."

"Shake!" said Enders.

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